The Nature of God

DOES GOD ANSWER PRAYER?

•

NO. 7 OF A SERIES

DELIVERED SUNDAY, MARCH 18, 1945

by

DUNCAN E. LITTLEFAIR, B.D., Ph.D.

Minister of

FOUNTAIN STREET BAPTIST CHURCH

GRAND RAPIDS, MICHIGAN

VOL. I - NO. 8

THE NATURE OF GOD

A Series of Sermons for Inquiring Minds

February 4th—
THE PLACE OF REASON IN RELIGION
Why should we analyze or criticize or compare?
Is one religion as good as another?

* February 11th—
IS THERE A PLACE IN RELIGION FOR THE SUPERNATURAL?
What is the relationship of natural law to religious thought?

February 18th—
CAN WE PROVE THE EXISTENCE OF GOD?
What are the traditional arguments?
Is there any value in humanism?

* February 25th—
THE NATURE OF GOD
An attempt to specifically describe the nature of God.

* March 4th—
IS GOD A PERSON?
A consideration of the traditional problems concerning the "personality" of God.

March 11th—
THE INJUSTICE OF GOD

* March 18th—
DOES GOD ANSWER PRAYER?

March 25th—
THE PSYCHOLOGICAL APPROACH TO GOD

* It is suggested that these sermons are most important for the development of the theme.

Does God Answer Prayer?

● Is God changeless and eternal? Then what is the use of praying? Does God know everything? Then why should we inform Him further? Does God have our best interests at heart? Then why should we be required to beseech Him for good gifts? There are a lot more questions on the nature of prayer that have been, and probably are, a source of disturbance to many, if not all of you. I trust we shall deal with some of them this morning.

First of all let us not be afraid of terminology. In our discussion group, it has been coming out that there is a rather general attitude of objection, to put it mildly, or revulsion, against the use of such terms as "prayer" and "worship". Now, we ought to realize, and I have been emphasizing it week after week, that the words we use are inconsequential. The word is of no importance. It is the reality we seek to describe by the use of the term that is important. For instance, I would not quarrel with anyone who wanted to change the name "God" to something else. I don't care what term you use for God as long as you are finding the Reality behind the term. If you can find a better term, use it. If you can find a better term than "worship" or "prayer", then find it and use it. But, in the meantime, don't be led astray by an objection to the use of a term. You should re-interpret and re-discover the reality that that term has been used in the past to describe.

There is, however, a widespread turning away from payer in the modern word. We aren't praying as much as we used to. We don't accept prayer, and those who are courageous and independent enough to have ventured out of the traditional moulds of the Christian Church to do their own thinking have been the first to discard the practice because they could see no relationship between the activity as known and their new philisophical position.

There are two reactions for enlightened people to take — no, I phrase that improperly — there are more than two, but there are two chief ways in which modern Man has reacted to the problem of prayer under the pressure of a growing knowledge of the nature of himself, his universe, and a new understanding of the Nature of God. First of all, he has said that prayer is

wrong. It has no virtue and no validity. He has discarded it because he thinks it runs counter to his intelligence. Then there is another group. It is a larger group that has had the same experience of not being able to interpret rationally and fully understand this activity which is nevertheless important to them. When their doubts began to interfere with this activity which was so important, they took the opposite course, and said, "Well, let's not think about it. After all, reason, you see, is just something that men use, and surely God is more than reason. Therefore," (illogically, of course) "God is beyond reason, and prayer is something that has to do with this mysterious supernatural God. Man can't comprehend it, so let's stop thinking, but let's go on praying."

● Now, of course, those two courses do not exhaust the possibilities. The third possibility is that when men begin to criticize this activity, and to find that it is not holding water, they stop and say, "Well, now there have been millions of men throughout history who have prayed, and have kept on praying because of the tremendous value that came from it. Surely there must be something to it. Let's find out what it is." Perhaps prayer itself is not at fault, but our understanding of it.

I am approaching this sermon with dismay. I can only begin to hint at the values involved. You will have to develop it for yourself as we go. But I trust that as we work together we shall gain a deeper appreciation. Furthermore, I am anxious to make it clear that I am not an expert in the field. I lay no claims, as yet, to having probed very deep into the power that comes from prayer, but I have hopes, and I trust you will have them too.

Why do men pray? There are many reasons. I shall go over some of the major reasons that are advanced that your mind may be clear on their inadequacy, or, if you like, their adequacy. That is for you to decide.

First of all, Prayer is a harmless custom. Mother and father have always prayed. We always had Grace at the table, and we always said our prayers at night before we went to bed. I don't see that it does much good, but after all, it doesn't do any harm, does it? So why not just keep it up? This explanation sounds plausible but it is a very bad one. You can't afford to tinker with something that is important. Either you will be destroyed in the tinkering, or else the important thing will be lost sight of because you have approached it in a trifling fashion. Prayer, if it be worth anything at all is terribly important. In like manner, religion should be tremendously important to you

or not important at all. You should either de dead serious about your Religion, or forget about it altogether. So with Prayer, if it be a harmless custom for you, stop it. You are just demeaning and debasing and discrediting the activity. But then that is not altogether true for Prayer will stand on its own feet. It would be more accurate to say that you are doing these things to yourself. You can't play harmlessly with very important things.

2. Everyone prays. Of course, some of these reasons will be very much like others. But they come in various forms, and should be recognized. Everyone prays. Well, everyone doesn't pray, and suppose everyone did? That's no argument in its behalf. Our responsive reading this morning was centered around the idea that after all, a mature modern man's judgment should be his own. This is particularly true of a religious person. Because everyone does something is no reason why the religious person should do it. He has got a standard that's not dependent upon the dictates of the greatest number, or Society. His standard is God. Because everyone does it is no reason why he should, and no indication of the value of the activity.

3. It may do some good. This idea is very widespread, and interestingly enough, is one of the chief reasons why the Christian Church was accepted by the Roman Emperors. At the time of the Christian Church's entry into the accepted Pantheon of religions, it was only one of a great many outside the pale. The emperors picked those religions that gave evidence of power. If it looked as though they might possibly have a little power with the deities, then the emperor took them into the accepted circle. So Christianity was taken in. Not much harm would be done, and perhaps a great deal of good would result. And that is the basis upon which many pray. It is a magic concept. They don't stop to examine the practice to determine whether it really is valuable, or why, and in what manner. They just perform the routine and hope for the best. But you can't handle reality in magical fashion. Either you try to understand it as it is, or you leave it alone. Magic is a superstition, and when you approach real things with a superstitious attitude, you are not in a frame of mind to accept them or to understand them, and sooner or later, they will break you. Facts aren't something you can take or leave alone. They act on you. Prayer, too, is real and important, and if it is used, it should be understood.

● 4. We are afraid not to pray. This, too, is a part of the magical approach. We don't know what it does, but we are not going to take any chances. There are some cute stories — one

just popped into my mind, but I won't give it — of children making the discovery that when they didn't pray, nothing happened to them. It was a great adventure and a risk, but they won out. However, most people don't go so far as to make that experiment. They just go on being afraid, and so they go on praying.

● 5. Prayer pleases God. It is surprising, I think, how much Prayer is based on this notion. Prayer pleases God. You can catch the vision of a benign old gentleman being pleased at the homage paid to him by one of his children, or a stranger. Pleasing God! As though God were Someone Who could be pleased or displeased. As though He inhabited the kind of body that we do, and shared in our deficiencies and our jealousies and our prides. We have to be pleased. We like people to flatter us, and when they do, we react more kindly toward them out of gratitude for their having lifted us a little notch, because we have so little confidence in ourselves. We seem to require this flattery, and so Prayer pleases and flatters God.

6. Prayer appeases God. It is part of the same picture. It is a little worse. Here is a God Who has got his mind set on doing something, and He is angry with you — the great tribal chief, again — He is angry with you. He is going to hurl His thunderbolt at you. He is going to exercise his anger on you. He will destroy you because He is displeased. And so you pray to Him, and you flatter Him, and you please Him; and God changes His mind and decides that He will let you off.

7. Prayer has power with or over the will of God. Pause for a minute and imagine the kind of a world this would be if God's Will could be changed by people like us! Just think of it. Consider the difficulties that come from men and women creating God in their own image, trying to create and fashion Him to support what they want and what they feel are their emotional requirements. And all this at a time when people are still low enough to go on murdering by the millions. We should have the privilege of changing God's Will, running the universe, in effect? On this basis, the harder you pray, the more God will bend Himself to do what you want. And so because we outnumber the Germans, God will serve us. Because the Russians out-number us, God will serve the Russians. Surely the modern man could not long continue to accept such an idea. Nevertheless, there is biblical authority for such a notion in the story of the Importunate Widow. This story is cast on the low spiritual

level that God will get tired if you bother Him enough, and so let you have what you want.

8. Prayer is the way to get supernatural strength when your own has failed. It means that you go on about your business as long as the tasks fall within the scope of the power of your hands and your mind, but then when they get beyond you, and you are in a tight spot, you call on God to come to the rescue. So He comes down from His realm on high, invades the world of Natural law and adjusts it to meet your particular need at the moment. He interposes in your favor. He stops the sun, He steers the bullet, He channels the flow of lava so that it doesn't touch you, or He preserves your forest or garden or house in the hurricane and let's it blow down that of another. Now, I am willing and eager to say with all the ferver I have that God can do tremendous things for Man; and that God is certainly not restricted by Man's capacity; and that God's power is not dependent upon Man and his knowledge. At best we know only a trifling amount of the goodness of God. But when you talk of only going to God when you have passed your power, it means that you are making Him an errand boy. And when you talk of having supernatural help come down to aid you after you have exhausted all the resources that are here, it means you have made Religion a matter of magic, for God is a Deity to be persuaded by gifts and cajoled and put in the corner so that He has to help you.

Now, then, what is Prayer? We have spent this time discussing some of the ideas current on the subject. Now, what is Prayer? I am going to give a very simple definition. It is a simple thing. It is as simple as God. Prayer is the voluntary, self-conscious effort of the personality to adjust itself to God so that God can work more effectively in him and through him. It is the voluntary, self-conscious effort of the personality to adjust itself to God so that God can work more effectively in and through that individual. Prayer is the turning of the self toward the source of goodness in the world — the goodness in which we live and move and have our being and upon which we are dependent. It is the adjustment of the self to this source of power so that it may flow through us more effectively and creatively and abundantly than otherwise it could, thus transforming us and our world in ways that we haven't even imagined.

● You bring your problems to God in Prayer. Santayana has said, and this is a minimum statement, "The only perfectly rational form of life for an individual that has reached self-

consciousness is the life of Prayer." Note the emphasis on self-consciousness! Remember, Prayer is a self-conscious effort. But God for the most part is beyond our consciousness. You see, we know so little of God. He works in the cell. He works in the relationship of the cells to each other. He works in the relation of the organs of our body to each other. He works in all the contacts and confidences that exist between ourselves and others, in mutuality of life and interest, in the creative growth of our minds and truth, beauty, goodness, and love. He sustains us because He created us. He is that upon which we are dependent. He made personality. Personality must find God and live in Him in order to grow and if we are to have any human life on this planet, we must live it in and through God.

● Now, how much of this God do we know? We are just beginning to grasp Him. That means that it is our opportunity and necessity to begin to focus the lens of our mind and spirit upon this Source that we may make greater use of it. The scientists have only, within the last one hundred years or so, begun to probe the power that lies in physical matter. Now it is time, isn't it, Yea, it is more than time, that mankind began to turn its resources toward this greatest source of strength and goodness that we may now make progress in the more important realm of human relationships. This is exactly what Prayer is intended to do. You take yourself, I don't care where you do it, or how you do it, or when you do it, but you take yourself out of this world with all its confusion and perplexities. You take yourself away from these problems that are pressing upon you. You remove yourself from the pressure of things that are dictating to you what you ought to do when you are not sure that that's the thing that your better nature should allow you to do. You remove yourself from all the strain, and you get together with yourself and God to find out what He is, where He stands in these matters, what His Will is for you and how you should meet this requirement of all human life. How much time do you spend doing that? You spend all the hours of the day and so many years in school and in apprenticeship learning how to handle the forces of business. Now, why don't we spend some time learning how to work with God so that we can grow in greatness, stature, and goodness, and in favor with our fellow-men? Prayer is the voluntary, self-conscious effort to put ourselves into a relationship to God, the Source of all Goodness, so that that Source can work more effectively in us and through us.

A man in my office during the week, in describing another point, used this illustration. He said, "I have got a piece of material of a certain weight and size;" and he said, "There is a radiator. If I want to get this piece hot, it depends on how I hold it in relation to that radiator, as to how hot it will get, and how quickly. If I hold it parallel to the radiator so that the thin edge is toward the radiator, it will not get very hot, but if I turn it up so that the broad surface is faced in the right direction, it will absorb that heat much more efficiently and quickly." This is a figurative expression of what we do in Prayer. You are directing yourself toward God. You are pointing your being to Him wherever He is; and you know from what we have said, that He is here all around us. He is in everything. He is here in this world. And so you being to seek Him out, and when you find Him, and expose yourself to Him, He can pour Himself through you more effectively than otherwise He could; and you begin to see immediately the results of God working in you. God was there before you found Him. He will be there after you are gone. He is always the same. He only wants to work through you. All you have to do is adjust to Him so that the power that is God will be in and through you. If you don't, you will be destroyed because, you see, the power of God is a fact that must be reckoned with. You can't tamper and play with God. Either you use Him or you frustrate Him; and when you frustrate Him, He will burn you out. There will be too much friction, too much war, too much hatred, too much bitterness, and too much ill-will. God will destroy you, or you will destroy yourself. However you want to phrase it, it's the same thing.

● We have discussed in part what Prayer is. Now the question is: "How do you pray?" I am going to give you the method of Prayer as given by a philosopher who has meant more to me than any other man I have ever come into contact with.* I am bringing you his wisdom, and I assure you that it is a deep wisdom for it comes from a very great person. He says that there are these steps in Prayer, and I will be glad to attempt to work them out further with anyone who cares to do so. First of all, he said, in Prayer you relax. You relax from the tensions and the strains and the pressures, and let yourself become aware of this Power and of this Reality that is around you always, that is in everything you do, but which, like the air, is something that you haven't stopped to notice until something goes wrong. When you pray, you come into a building like this, (and you

*H. N. WIEMAN, University of Chicago — See Methods of Private Religious Living, MacMillan, New York, 1929.

know you are welcome in here any time during the week) or you sit at your desk, or you find yourself in a quiet room at home, or you walk in the night. How you do it is unimportant. But you must relax in pure contemplation of the Power that's about you and in you, which you can use if you want to. And then when you are aware of that, you begin to imagine the tremendous possibilities that are there, possibilities of growth, of goodness, of power, and ability, of beautiful living that you haven't seen yet. A picture of possibilities engendered by the few details you have seen. It's like opening a book of chemistry when you have never studied chemistry. You can first begin to see what is involved. In Prayer, you open the book of God, if you allow me this crass language, and you see the tremendous things that are possible if only you could rise to it. And so you allow that to play on you. You explore its depths a little. And then you bring to this awareness of yours the particular problem that you are dealing with. Now comes the use of your intelligence. Anyone who is living deeply and vigorously and well will always have problems. You must analyze your problem and face it squarely and honestly from all the sides because now you are not playing a part with your friends and your family. You are playing the part of the eternal relationship between you and your God, so you are not afraid to be honest. If you aren't willing to do this, don't get started on Prayer. But now you face it all. You look at it, and you analyze it. You use your mind to discover what needs to be done. You see what is the source of the trouble, whether it is your fear of losing a possession, or whether it is because you have tied yourself, unconsciously, too closely to some other individual so that if that individual is lost, you are lost. And so on. You realize, perhaps, that you have been putting someone in the plcae of God. Whatever the problem is: the need of money to keep your business going; a strength and a support for someone in the family who is dangerously ill or worried; whatever the problem is, you face it to see what can be done. And then you examine yourself to see what changes have to be made in you in order to solve this problem. Let it be noted that no man should ever go into Prayer over a problem without finding changes that need to be made in him, not in other people mind you, but changes in him. And that applies to everyone, Jesus included. You see what you have to do. What has been wrong with you that's led to this crisis? Have you been directed cleanly and clearly toward God? Have you been willing to let God work through you, or have you been

trying to tell Him what He ought to do and how He ought to do it? Have you been putting up some of your prides and traditions and training and inhibitions and desires over against Him? And so you work the change in yourself. At least you bring into your consciousness the changes that need to be made.

And then, in the fifth and last place, you put into words that which is needed for the solution of the problem in view of the tremendous possibilities of good that are in God. You put it into words, and you say it over and over and over again in order to impress it upon your consciousness. This is definitely a step in the procedure that could be termed "auto-suggestion". It seems to be a psychological necessity. Now, of course, this is just a suggestion, as are all these steps. Perhaps you yourself may not feel any such need.

Now, I am going to deal very briefly with some of the questions concerning Prayer. A series of questions which I shall try to answer in a word or two, that may be a guide to you in your own thinking and at the same time a useful summary.

First of all, are words necessary in Prayer? Well, they are a psychological necessity in the sense that we have just mentioned. But let us remember they are only a psychological necessity, or perhaps we should say help. Strictly speaking, words are not necessary for Prayer. The Prayer is never the words. Will you remember that? The Prayer is never the words. The Prayer is the attitude, and if you have to use words to get yourself in the right attitude, then use them. I don't care what you use. The techniques you use are a matter of personal importance only. Use any kind of technique that suits your personality. The Prayer is the effort to get the attitude, and it is the attitude itself. Words are just tools and instruments. You never pray just with words. If this were possible, talking machines could pray. It has been well said that the words have power over the individual only, but the Prayer has power with God.

● Secondly, is prayer objective or subjective? This is a question that bothers many people. Of course, everything is subjective, everything that is important to you or that touches you is subjective. It has to come through you. If you think something, it is something that is thought without you. If you see something, there is an emotional nerve reaction within you. If Prayer weren't subjective, you could turn it over to the priest and he would do it for you, and a lot of people are doing just that. They turn over to the priest the well-being of

their loved ones in the Army, and the priest prays for them. Of course, if your prayer is only something within yourself, that is, if it hasn't any outside relationship, if it is just an emotion, that, too, is inadequate. But prayer doesn't have to do only with the self, because it involves God, and God is that relationship in the universe upon which we are dependent. So, when you pray, you come into relationship with an objective fact that is out there, and that objective thing will work through you. Of course it is subjective. It has to be because it is the personality praying, but prayer is not merely an emotion which is what is implied by the use of the term "subjective".

● Thirdly, Is Prayer only auto-suggestion? It is nothing more than the individual's speaking to himself, and I trust we have answered that in this previous question. There is an element of auto-suggestion in that when you have arrived at the change and attitude that's necessary on your part, you put it into words so that it sinks down into your consciousness. Now, remember when we are living our best, we are living subconsciously. That is, our attitudes are those that don't have to be thought out. They have been developed in the meantime, so that they are an expression of our whole being. So in Prayer, you speak the changes needed and they go deep down into your system, and then in a week or two weeks, or a year or five years, you find that that attitude you sought has now become an intimate part of you. But it isn't only auto-suggestion because God isn't something you can pick up and manipulate and handle. You adjust to Him and He works through you. It's not you who do it. It is God through you, but it is you who have arranged to have God flow in that abundant way.

Does God Hear Prayer? Of course, not, if you mean that God is a Person who has ears to hear or a nervous sytem to receive sound waves set in motion by your vocal chords. Of course this sounds ridiculous, but isn't this what we mean by the use of the term "hear"? If we do not mean it in this way, we should be careful to explain our figurative use of the word.

Does God answer Prayer? Yes. But here we will have to interpret our answer a little. If you mean by "answer" that God speaks back to you, the answer is no. This, too, as above, would involve the idea that God is a Person Who speaks and hears. But if you mean by "answer" that there is a reaction between you and God upon your adjustment to Him in Prayer, the answer to your question is yes! If there isn't any such answer there is no point in Prayer. God does act on you. When you

adjust, He answers that adjustment by a greater use of you and by all the toning up and preparation of you for the jobs and tasks and privileges and opportunities that await you. God always answers prayer that is earnest, sincere, and intelligent. I am inclined to say that he will answer a prayer that is not intelligent but still earnest and sincere. Of course the answer may not be what was wanted or expected.

Can We Always Get What We Want? I don't know how much we can get, and you don't either. No man does. But I think it is safe to say that we can't always get what we want. In the first place, we don't always want the right things. In the second place, there is very frequently something that is terribly important to us, and we can't get it because we are not ready for it, or the circumstances are too strongly set against it. We want peace very badly, (or do we) and we are praying, praying for peace. Now, if we really want it, and we really pray in the right way for it, we can get it. But the condition of the world today, brought about by our lack of understanding of the Source of Goodness and our refusal to work with God, makes the achievement of peace at this time exceedingly difficult. It is not impossible, however, and could be won by recognition of the conditions and devotion to the God on whom our well being is dependent. If you want something badly, and it is needed for the growth of goodness and you pray earnestly for it, you will get it — sooner or later. We should recognize however, that prayer is only one of the ways in which attitudes are shaped. In many cases environment and the facts of the case are too strong. For instance, you can abide by the rules of health that you know, and you may still not be healthy. There are other factors that enter in. There is the kind of body that you have been given to begin with, and there are the circumstances that surround you and press down upon you, perhaps destroying or frustrating your very earnest efforts. So it is with prayer. God will work more effectively, the more perfectly we understand and adapt ourselves to Him. In other words we must pay attention to the rules of getting things through God. You may adjust to Him as best you can, but very often there are things that block you off. So you can't get anything you want, but anything you really want may *best* be gotten in this way.

● Is Prayer All Powerful? We have already answered this question in the negative. Prayer isn't all powerful, but I am inclined to agree with the statement that it is the most powerful force in the world! The most powerful force in the world, because

God is the Source of all Goodness. He is That upon which men are utterly dependent. Then when men find that Source and learn how to adjust it to and use it, there will be nothing good impossible to them.